

# Container Herb Gardening

## Herb Gardening

Don't use garden soil! Even the best garden soil is not the right choice for container growing. Though it may seem nutrient-rich and well-balanced, garden soil is always a problem. It will not provide adequate drainage and usually contains disease organisms, bacteria, and weed seeds. No matter how well it performs in the ground over the growing season, normal garden soil will soon form a compacted heavy mass, preventing root respiration and fertilizer absorption, resulting in stressed and hungry plants.

Each plant should get enough water to moisten the entire container. You'll know soil is saturated when water runs freely out the drainage holes. Poke a sharp stick into drainage holes occasionally to make sure they are working and be sure to empty any saucers you may use. If you find by testing with your fingers that the water is actually running down the sides of the container without wetting its contents, the soil mix has become compacted or overdry and water is unable to penetrate. Remedy this situation by poking many holes in the soil surface with a pencil or sharp thin stick to allow better drainage and then set a hose near the plant's base and let it trickle very lightly for several hours. If the container is not too heavy, you can also submerge it in a tub of water until it stops bubbling out air. Be careful; it will be heavy with water when lifted out!

Mulching is good strategy; when plants are 4-6 inches tall, cover container surface with a thick layer of sphagnum moss, pea gravel, or compost. If a large soil surface is exposed, you can plant a shallow-growing ground cover such as alyssum. (Peat is not a good mulch as it is difficult to moisten.)

All containers must have adequate unblocked drainage holes. If you cannot drill holes, be sure to put a layer of broken pottery, aquarium charcoal, small pebbles or styrofoam packing peanuts several inches thick in the bottom of each container. To ensure good air circulation and discourage rot, elevate your containers an inch or two above the ground on bricks or caster-wheeled plant stands. This will also avoid stains on decks. If you use plant saucers, be careful to empty them after each watering or drill holes in them and elevate above the ground for drainage. Using wheeled dollies also adds flexibility so that you can move containers around as light patterns shift to take advantage of sun or shade as your plants require. For example, pansies can be moved into cooler filtered shade in hot summer weather, or a salvia put in front of a south-facing wall in cooler autumn weather. It is fun to "redecorate" and change the look of your garden by moving plants around. If you use unglazed clay pots, soak them in water first so they absorb moisture and do not wick it from the soil. If reusing older containers, be sure to scrub them out with a brush and vinegar and water solution to remove debris and scaly deposits, finishing with a mild bleach and water solution (rinse with clear water). This prevents disease, "damping off," and mold problems.

Direct-sown seeds must be kept evenly moist but not soggy while awaiting germination. When seedlings are an inch or so high, be sure to thin them carefully and thoroughly to the spacing suggested on the packet. Proper thinning will ensure healthy and productive plants and cannot be neglected. Plant culinary herbs as close to the kitchen as possible so you'll find them convenient to use in everyday cooking, but note that they will usually not do well in tiny pots on a windowsill because there is





not enough light or soil. If you want to grow them indoors, use good-sized pots, and well-drained soil mix. Herb seeds often take several weeks to germinate, so keep the seed bed evenly moist while waiting for emergence. If you harvest your herb plants frequently, be sure to feed and water them well to

encourage more growth. Pinch off flowers as they appear to encourage leaf production for harvest.

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## Harvesting And Preserving Herbs

September is an excellent month to cut and preserve herbs intended for winter use in seasoning various dishes. They are best when dried fresh and lose their quality as they age. Herbs can also provide creative, tasteful alternatives to salt for those on a salt-free diet. Others may be trying to reduce and salt often causes water retention. So do yourself a favor - through the skillful use of herbs and spices, imaginative flavors can be created and simple foods made into gourmet delights.

Herbs and spices differ only in that herbs tend to be plants grown in temperate areas while spices grow in tropical regions. Many people prefer to grow their own herbs, just as their grandmothers did, so they will have a fresh supply throughout the growing season, thereby assuring top quality. Professional cooks prefer fresh herbs, if available. But fresh herbs are less concentrated, and two to three times as much should be used if a recipe calls for dried herbs.

If growing herbs for drying, the harvesting should be done in the morning after the dew has evaporated but before the sun is very bright. The essential oils in herbs will evaporate into the atmosphere during the day, so it is important to collect them when their flavor is at its peak. Cut only the amount to be used in one day.

The herbs should be dried in bunches or laid on screens in a warm, dark, well-ventilated spot. An attic is ideal, although closets or dry basements will suffice. The temperature should not be over 90 degrees. If it's too hot, the herbs will cook. The length of time required for drying will vary according to the thickness of the plant parts.

Herbs should be stored away from direct sunlight to prevent bleaching. Be sure they're well labeled. Most dried herbs will keep for at least one year in glass or plastic containers, but eventually they lose most of their potency and should be discarded.

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## Herb Sugars And Crystallized Herbs

Madelene Hill preserves the flavors of some of the sweeter herbs in sugar. The flavors blend and make lovely, subtle combinations to use instead of regular sugar in any cold food. Rose and lemon-scented geraniums, lemon verbena, or orange and lemon zest are particularly good to use in herb sugars.

You can pack fresh herb leaves in granulated white sugar in airtight containers. Stir every day to prevent clumping. After the sugar stays dry and loose, remove the leaves before they become crumbly, and use the finished 'herb sugar' in iced teas or desserts. Note: The aromatic oils bake off, so they don't work well in baked or cooked dishes.

To make herbs into syrups to add to iced tea or lemonade or bake into custards or other desserts, Madelene Hill recommends putting a handful of herb branches in a simmering sugar syrup; remove them when the herbs lose their color and the syrup is fragrant. The syrup is ready to use right away.

American colonists, who couldn't run to the store to buy candy when they had a sweet tooth, made their own sweet treats out of herbs. They candied young angelica stems and ginger, preserving the herb and bringing out its flavor with a crystal sugar shell. Although these may not replace modern candies, they are wonderful to use as dessert garnishes or edible decorations on cakes and pastries.

Cookbooks of the 1700s recommended this process for candied angelica. Harvest young angelica stems and boil them until tender. Peel off the fibrous strings and simmer the stems again until they become very green. Dry the stems and weigh them; add a pound of double-refined (very finely textured) sugar to each pound of angelica stems. Let the combination stand for two days, then boil the blend until it becomes clear. Drain off the syrup. Spread another pound of refined sugar over the angelica, set the stems on glass plates, and let them dry in a warm place.

Violets and rose petals are even easier to candy. Brush a little egg white all over each flower and dip it in superfine or powdered sugar. Let the sugar dry into a clear coating, and store in an airtight container.

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## Salting Herbs

You can dry herbs in salt and use the flavored salt to season your foods. Salt draws moisture from herbs and at the same time absorbs some of their essential oils. It works best with thin-leaved herbs such as savory, rosemary, marjoram, dill, tarragon, and thyme, but it can be satisfactory with most large-leaved herbs such as basil if you use fewer leaves and more salt. Here is how you dry herbs in salt.

Harvest the herbs you want to use, either a single type or a blend of complementary herbs. Wash them and dry them well with a thick towel. Then remove any thick stems or inedible parts. Chop the herbs up finely if you intend to use the salt and herb blend directly for seasoning. Now take a container of non-iodized or kosher salt and an airtight container such as a canning jar or freezer container. Put a 1/4-inch layer of salt in the bottom. Then sprinkle on a thin layer of herbs. Cover the herbs with another layer of salt, and continue in this manner until you have used up all your herbs or reached the top of the container. Cover the top layer of herbs completely with salt and seal the jar.

In about a week, the herbs will be dry. You can pull out individual sprigs and crumble them into dishes as they are. Or you can brush off the extra salt before you use them. If you want to use the herbed salt to sprinkle on a variety of foods, blend the herbs together with the salt thoroughly. Then pour into a smaller, airtight container that you can keep on your kitchen counter or dining room table.

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## How to Dry Herbs

To dry thin-leaved herbs such as thyme and rosemary, make bundles of 3 to 5 sprigs, tie them together with a twist tie, and hang them in a warm, airy, dry, and dark location. (Keep them out of the traffic areas.) They should dry to feel crisp in a couple days.

For large-leaved herbs that you can't get to dry well by hanging, any dehydrator will work as long as it has a low setting (90f-95fF). You can put sprigs or individual leaves in the dehydrator. The leaves will dry faster when stripped off the stem, but sprigs are easier to handle. When dried, the crispy leaves snap right off when you run your fingers down the stem. Most herbs will dry overnight in a dehydrator.

When the herbs are dry, put them in the oven at 120°F for a few minutes to make the herbs as crackly as corn flakes. Strip the leaves off the woody stems. If you're sure they're completely dry, you can store the whole leaves, which helps preserve essential oils. But I've had a lot of problems with mildew on herbs stored this way. So I now process them into flakes in a blender or food processor. I add a cup or two of leaves and pulse them in the blender until they become large flakes. Then I seal them in an airtight jar. I like to add a small packet of white rice, wrapped up in cloth or paper, to suck up any excess humidity. You can store the jars in a cool, dark cupboard, but I like to keep the jars in the refrigerator, which helps preserve quality longer.

To dry roots such as orris root, horseradish, and lovage, slice them thin and put them in a dehydrator or warm oven to dry until they are hard. Store in an airtight jar.

To dry seeds, hang the mature plants upside-down over newspaper or cloth in a warm, dry location. When the seeds fall, they're easy to scoop up. You also can dry herb seeds in a dehydrator on low heat. But if the seeds are small, cover the drying trays with cheesecloth so the seeds won't fall through. When dry, you may need to separate the seeds from the rest of the plant. Put the dried material on one side of a cookie sheet that has elevated edges. Crush the plant debris with your hands. Then elevate the tray slightly so the seeds will slide down, separate from the chaff. Once they are separated, put the seeds in the freezer for 48 hours to kill any pests that may be inside. Then seal them in an airtight jar and store in a cool, dry location.

To dry flowers for potpourri or herb wreaths, place individual flowers or sprigs in the dehydrator. Grower Marty Sickinger likes to dry flowers upright in a vase with a little bit of water. Let the water evaporate slowly, while the plants maintain their open shape. This works especially well with black-eyed Susans and daffodils, which would dry closed up if you hung them upside-down. Experiment with different flowers. Some dry well upside-down, and some dry best spread out on a screen. Develop the method that works best for you.

One way to gather dill seed is to hang the plant upside-down and wrap a paper bag around it to collect the seed as it dries and falls off.

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## Drying the Harvest - Tips From An Expert

**Microwave Oven** Place one layer of plant materials between two paper towels, setting timer for 2 or 3 minutes. Give additional 30-second shots as necessary. Jot down for future reference how much drying time was needed for each variety.

**Conventional Oven** Set temperature no higher than 100°F and heat materials on a baking sheet until crisp. (My old oven goes no lower than 150°F, so I keep oven door ajar.)

**Food Dehydrator** Set temperature between 95°F and 100°F.

**Gas Oven With Constant-Burn Pilot Light** Dispel any moisture in the oven by leaving the door open while heating at the lowest temperature setting that will keep the flame burning. After 2 or 3 minutes, turn off oven, place baking sheet of materials in, close oven door and forget it until you have to heat the oven for cooking. Then you'd better remember that they're in there!

**Dehydrating Oast** The oast (drying oven) that my husband built into our former broom closet is my favorite place for drying my harvests. It's 14" high, 14" wide, and 26" deep. Shallow ledges along the sides of its front will suspend three flower presses (also made by him) with room for a fourth to rest on the floor of the oast. In a corner at the back, he anchored a ceramic base for a light bulb. A 60-watt bulb heats the top front of the oast to an ideal 110°F, the lower front to 95°F. Hardware cloth (an aluminum mesh available from hardware stores) is used for 'shelves' when I dry roses in their whole form. Miniature roses are placed upright on the mesh; larger types are

hung head down, their stems pushed through the mesh and secured with small binder clips from the stationer's. Atop the flower presses and/or the hardware cloth shelves, styrofoam trays (from packaged meats) filled with materials can rest.

**Storage** Place each type/color of blossoms in a separate glass jar with a screw top, so you can see what you have of what when it comes time to mix a recipe. During the first week after drying the materials, check every few days to be sure they're still crisp. If not, it's back to Square One, the drying tray!

**Tips** Spread a white towel on your working surface on which to dump the day's haul of plants to dry or press. That makes it easy to spot the creepy crawlers and UFO's that came along for a free ride. You can use the corner of the towel to help the destroyer types along on their journey to That Great Bug Heaven In The Sky; but be a sport and free the praying mantis, ladybug, or any other carnivore that was tending the garden for you.

**Bugs** Once in awhile a tiny beetle will escape your attention and will manage to survive the heat of the drying process. You may not even notice the little dude in the mixing and aging process. Then when you've capped the glass container and stand admiring your beautiful creation, up he jumps! Not to worry. Don't empty the container. Leave the jar capped and stick it in the freezer for a couple of days. End of problem. (Although you should check contents for any moisture from the freezer and re-heat if necessary.)

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### ***Here's a quick checklist of good ways to preserve the herbs you are growing:***

- **Drying** works well for basil, dill, fennel, lovage, mint, oregano, parsley, hot peppers, rosemary, sage, savory, scented geraniums, tarragon, and thyme.
- **Freezing** works well with basil, chervil, chives, cilantro, dill, lemon balm, parsley, hot peppers, sorrel, sweet cicely, and tarragon.

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#### ***From The Books:***

##### ***Sleeping With A Sunflower***

**By Louise Riotte**

##### ***The Pleasure of Herbs***

**By Phyllis V. Shaudys**

##### ***The Herb Gardener: A Guide for All Seasons***

**By Susan McClure**